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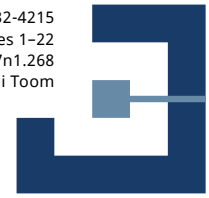

Castledown

Enrolled or engaged? Students' perceptions of engagement and oral interaction in a blended learning language course

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Student engagement is essential in online language courses where the risk of suspending studies is higher than in face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, oral language rehearsal is challenging in such a course; therefore providing sufficient assignments to rehearse oral interaction is central. This study investigates how student engagement and oral language skills rehearsal are perceived in a blended learning language course. The course design was based on multimodality and the applied theoretical frameworks were ecological language learning and the notion of engagement. The study was conducted, and the data were collected in a 5-credit course for 1st-year business administration students (n=22). The qualitative data include students' learning diaries and open-ended questions of a post-course online questionnaire; the data were analysed according to the qualitative content analysis method. The findings suggest that meaningful course design with authentic assignments and course material enhanced students' academic engagement; students' own activity was perceived to foster academic engagement equally. Social engagement was reinforced mainly by successful collaboration, but students' own actions had a great impact as well. In terms of oral interaction, collaborative, meaningful assignments and student's own investment in practicing had a positive impact on students' oral interaction. This study contributes to earlier research since it provides an insight into student academic and social engagement in a blended learning context and

the findings can guide educators to design more engaging language learning courses in higher education.

Keywords: engagement; higher education; blended learning; oral interaction

1. Introduction

In the context of higher education, communication and language courses are offered increasingly as online or blended learning approaches. Blended learning is a model that combines face-to-face and distance learning (Gaebel, Kupriyanova, Morais & Colucci, 2014; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014). This model affords students to practice their autonomy, but it also includes higher risks for interrupting studies. Persistence in such courses is often lower than in face-to-face learning, particularly if students do not feel competent in the learning environment. Furthermore, as higher education institutes emphasise online learning, students are increasingly non-traditional students, who often work alongside their studies. Students are enabled to combine studies with work (Thompson, Miller & Pomykal-Franz, 2013) when higher education institutes offer degree programmes in which face-to-face teaching occurs in the evenings or during weekends, but balancing between studies and external commitments can cause stress and timetable overlapping which in turn might lead to interrupting studies (Thompson *et al.*, 2013). Educators benefit from increasing their knowledge on aspects that promote engagement and persistence in online learning and design their courses accordingly.

In language studies, including online learning, the aim is to cover all language competences. Oral language skill practice appears to be challenging to implement, even though oral interaction is the skill working life requires from Bachelor of Business Administration the most; mastering interaction in English is a prerequisite for many expertise works (Confederation of Finnish Industries, 2014). Successful oral interaction requires multiple skills at the same time: pronunciation, fluency, turn-taking, vocabulary, grammar, non-verbal communication, topic management, and interactive listening. The purpose of the education in universities of applied sciences is to provide students with skills that ensure them better competences for working life; therefore, it is essential to provide enough opportunities to rehearse also oral interaction.

This study investigates the students' perceptions of engagement and oral interaction on a language course for first-year business administration students at a university of applied sciences.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Ecological perspective and multimodality

The ecological language learning approach (van Lier, 2000; 2004) forms the framework to investigate student engagement and oral communication in

relation to the pedagogical design applied in the course in question. The ecological language learning approach focuses on learners, their social activity, interaction with others and the environment, and how the learners perceive and use affordances (van Lier, 2000). The notion of autonomy describes how self-regulated learners use affordances in the environment or those provided by the teacher to enhance their learning, according to their own needs and goals (van Lier, 2004). Autonomy is entwined with the idea of authenticity which refers to contextualised learning. Not only is it recommended that learning material is authentic but that it stimulates interaction between learners to produce a genuine transferable response to real-life situations (García-Sánchez & Luján-García, 2016).

Language competence is seen as an in-the-world set of skills, which develops through social interaction (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978), and oral language competence is viewed as a skill needed for communication in authentic situations, where focus is not on the linguistic correctness, but rather on passing the message. Interactivity in online courses, both student-teacher, and student-student interaction increases students' satisfaction and persistence (Espasa & Meneses, 2010; Liu & Chao, 2018). A real need for active learning and interaction implies that students want to act with real people and belong to a real group of people, on- and offline (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Kahu, 2013). Further, online task-oriented interaction can promote language development by activating students to use the target language (Sert & Balaman, 2018).

The multimodal learning approach (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) utilises modes of communication, such as visual, audio, text or speech, and it provides the tools to implement an ecological learning approach into practice. Virtual learning environments (VLEs) enable educators to provide learning material in various modes, and the combination of these modes supports learning. Further, in VLEs various media and methods are selected according to their suitability to the learning activities (Jalkanen & Taalas, 2013). Multimodal, student-centered methods are especially suited for language learning because the tasks are aimed to be authentic, in accordance with ecological learning approach.

Contemporary technology enables ubiquitous learning with handheld devices which makes multimodality easier to implement. Smartphones enhance accessibility in language learning (Wrigglesworth, 2019). The combination of pedagogically sound approaches supported by suitable technology can have a positive impact on online language learning (Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2014; Rienties, Lewis, McFarlane, Nguyen, & Toetenel, 2018). Moreover, oral communication in a foreign language tends to be more stress-free online than in face-to-face learning situations (Leier & Korkealehto, 2018; Bueno-Alastuey & López Pérez, 2014). Additionally, technology provides students with opportunities to communicate freely and peer or expert feedback can promote learning. Shadiev and Yang (2020) stated that technology offers means for learners' own language skills to emerge when they use the target language in their own production and peer interaction and gain relevant feedback from their peer. Romaña Correa (2015) gained positive results when learners of English as a foreign language used conference calls,

as the calls improved the learners' interaction and language fluency. Taillefer & Munoz-Luna (2014) discovered that mutual understanding among language learner pairs (Spanish-English) was reinforced by non-verbal communication which was enabled by Skype calls. Additionally, the calls provide opportunities for authentic learning and communicative competence improvement.

2.2 Student engagement

Even though the term engagement is elusive, and it has various definitions in the literature, the importance of it is understood and seen as an indicator of the quality of student experience in higher education (Kahu, 2013; Redmond, Heffernan, Abawi, Brown, & Henderson 2018). Albeit student engagement has proved to have positive effects on learning and interaction, it does not automatically ensure good learning results. Students' experiences are dependent on teachers' pedagogical and emotional engagement and other students' interactions (Kangas, Siklander, Randolph, & Ruokamo, 2017). Teacher engagement is important in any learning context, but student engagement is salient especially on online courses because of the higher risk to interrupt the studies.

The notion of engagement is multidimensional and dynamic. In the extant literature, the concept has been defined in various ways, but the widely agreed-upon three-part typology engagement comprises behavioural, emotional and cognitive components (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioural engagement entails participation and involvement in academic or social activities through time and effort spent on learning activities and interactions with peers and teachers (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2009). Emotional engagement entails students' affective reactions to learning (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004) and includes reactions and attitudes that students have related to teachers, peers, studying habits, subjects, and institute at large. Cognitive engagement entails a willingness and motivation to invest effort in comprehending complex ideas and mastering high-level skills (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004).

The emotional engagement overlaps with social engagement, which means students' social investment in the collegiate experience and compassing academic and non-academic activities outside the classroom as well as social discussions (Coates, 2006). In addition, the sense of belonging to the learning community can be a part of emotional engagement (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Kahu, 2013) or social engagement. Social engagement is equally important to the academic one since it enhances students' social-emotional wellbeing. Social engagement is essential for pair and group assignments and it provides a basis for discussions on personal issues (Sinha, Rogat, Adams-Wiggins, & Hmelo-Silver, 2015). According to Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012), the factors that affect social engagement are mutual respect, supporting relationships, fairness as well as challenging and rigorous tasks and positive and safe learning environments.

This three-dimensional academic engagement framework is suitable for exploring student engagement in a traditional setting, but for online learning environments in higher education, a modified version is recommended

by Redmond *et al.* (2018). Their suggestion includes five elements: social, cognitive, behavioural, collaborative and emotional engagement. The context of this research is blended learning including distance and face-to-face sessions; hence we combine the previous approaches and use the three-dimensional frame of *academic engagement* including behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects with additional *social engagement*, in which we include both social and collaborative aspects. In technology-enhanced language learning, the results on student engagement indicate that digital tools foster enjoyment, satisfaction, and motivation (Hsu, Wang, & Comac, 2008; Sun, 2010) and they improve students' self-reflection, interaction, and collaboration (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Rivens Mompean, 2010; Liu, Wang, & Tai, 2016) which all enhance engagement.

3. Aim of the study

To contribute to the previous research, this study aims to gain a better understanding of undergraduate students' perceptions of engagement by examining the ability of digital pedagogy to enhance student engagement as well as oral interaction in a blended learning language course. Two research questions were addressed:

1. Which features do students perceive enhancing academic and social engagement in a blended learning language course?
2. Which features do students perceive enhancing oral communication in a blended learning language course?

4. Methods

4.1 Context and participants

In Finland, universities of applied sciences offer bachelor's degree programmes in several disciplines. Bachelor's degree programme in business administration educates professionals for management or independent entrepreneurs. The courses consist of 210 ECT credits and it takes 3.5 years to complete. In Bachelor's degree programmes, students must demonstrate a defined proficiency in the national languages, Finnish and Swedish, and at the minimum one foreign language. The language studies are integrated into the professional subject content. Languages for specific purposes and vocationally oriented language learning form one basis of professional competence, where the content and terminology covered are typical of a particular field (Kantelinen & Airola, 2008), here business administration.

The course in question is a mandatory Business English course and the study participants were 22 first-year business administration students at a university of applied sciences. The students were conducting their studies with a blended learning approach. The age and the educational background of the participants were heterogeneous: eight students had a previous bachelor's degree, five a high school diploma, five a high school diploma with vocational qualifications and four had vocational qualifications. The age range varied from 21 to

52 years. All students worked alongside their studies and their language skill level was B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (European Union, 2018).

4.2 Course design and educational technology tools

The students participated in the degree programme through a blended learning mode. The duration of the Bachelor of Business Administration degree programme was 3.5 years and it was implemented in a manner where the students had face-to-face periods on Fridays and Saturdays. These face-to-face periods included several subjects, and in the degree programme timetable only five face-to-face sessions within 16 weeks were allocated for the investigated Business English course, hence the course had to be designed accordingly. The duration of the course was 16 weeks, comprising five face-to-face sessions in weeks 1, 3, 7, 13 and 15. The course was divided into 8 topics, as described in Table 1. According to the curriculum, the learning outcomes were: students will be proficient in the basics of business English both in speaking and writing and they will master main communication events and vocabulary of the field.

Table 1. Business English course design

Week	Topic	Moodle assignments	Moodle forum	Assessment
1	General		Introduce yourself (video)	pass/fail
			Find a pair (written)	pass/fail
2	Education and business studies	Describe your education (recording)		0–5
3	Social skills		Hand gesture (video)	0–5
4	Telephoning	How to sound polite on phone (written)		0–5
5-6	Business and society		Have you considered becoming an entrepreneur (written)	0–5
7-8	Working life		What motivates you at work? (written)	0–5
9-11	Job application	CV (written)		0–5
		Covering letter (written)		
		Application (video)		0–5
12-14	Company environments	Company presentation (oral/video)	Have you been on a business trip? (written)	0–5
15-16	Global competence	Business culture of a chosen country (written essay)		0–5

The target was to support student engagement and to cover all language

competences, particularly oral interaction and therefore the course material and the assignments were carefully planned for a pedagogically sound model. Field-specific, context-aware language learning is a suitable guideline in a university of applied sciences where professional skills are in focus.

The students were given ample opportunities for their contribution in the target language. The assignments were to be conducted as audio files, photos, videos and texts using educational technology applications. Furthermore, the students were asked to keep their reflective learning diaries in Finnish. The learning diary being kept in the students' mother tongue enabled the students to reflect on their learning and emotions during the course profoundly. The students were instructed to write an entry at least once a week, but preferably after each time, they had studied English.

Moodle was used as the learning management platform. The course was divided into eight modules, each module including study material, related links as well as listening, reading, written and oral tasks; a part of which were individual and a part pair work. Each module included a compulsory oral pair discussion task on the related topic. Besides the learning platform Moodle, several digital applications were used to enhance studying: WhatsApp video calls for oral interaction and listening skills, Vocaroo and Adobe Spark for speaking and listening, Kahoot for learning vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, Quizlet for learning vocabulary, and Answergarden for writing and interaction.

Throughout the course the students had the same pair with whom they conducted the oral interaction assignments weekly via WhatsApp video calls and the allocated time for this activity was 1 hour/week. In addition, the students were required to make video recordings with Adobe Sparks on topics such as their own introduction and a job application. Vocaroo was used in Moodle Forums for expressing students' own opinions on topics such as motivation or explaining about their own work experience or contemplating their opportunities on becoming an entrepreneur. Video recordings covered assignments such as explaining and showing one gesture related to intercultural communication. In each module, there was a Quizlet study set which covered the vocabulary of the topic, and the students were able to rehearse the words in the multiple ways Quizlet offers. In face-to-face sessions, students added words to Answergarden and a word cloud was created which sparked oral or written interaction according to the teacher's instructions. Additionally, Kahoot was utilised in-class for practising vocabulary or phrases.

In terms of course assessment, the videos and discussions as well the assignments were rated in the scale 0–5. The essay formed 20%, the oral presentation 30%, CV, application and application video formed 30% of the mark and the rest of the assignments and discussions contributed 20% to the final mark.

4.3 Data collection

The qualitative data comprised the following from 22 participants: reflective learning diaries and responses to the eight open-ended questions of the post-course Google Forms questionnaire. The students were instructed to write at

least one entry once a week in a free format to describe how they have studied English, which aspect they found beneficial and which aspects hindered their learning. The length of the learning diaries varied from 335 to 2626 words, an average learning diary comprised 1700 words and the total number of words was 31,077. The learning diaries were written throughout the course in Word documents and the students uploaded the finalised diaries to Moodle after the course. The students were reminded via an email a week after the course completion and again after two weeks. All students who completed the course in the time limit uploaded their diaries to Moodle.

The eight open-ended questions of the questionnaire covered students' perceptions of the course, digital tools, Moodle assignments, weekly pair discussions, course atmosphere, face-to-face teaching, additional ways of studying English during the course and their active role as students. The responses amounted to 2107 words. The link to the Google Forms questionnaire was uploaded to Moodle and it was opened after the last face-to-face session. In a week a reminder was sent through email, after which all students answered the questionnaire.

4.4 Data analysis

The data were analysed using the qualitative content analysis method, which provides procedures for rigorous analysis of written data and means to describe the phenomenon comprehensively (Krippendorff, 2004). The analysis was conducted with an abductive approach which enables the research to move iteratively between the data and theory. This iterative method allowed the combination of theory-informed and data-grounded analysis of the data.

In the first stage of the analysis, the data were read and segmented, that is, all relevant items regarding either engagement and or oral interaction were marked and chosen to be analysed utilising Atlas.ti software (version 8.4.18). As a segment was counted an expression conveying an impression or opinion related to academic or social engagement or oral communication, be that a single word, a clause or a longer extract of the text. The number of marked segments was 1728 and they were titled descriptively according to the expressions. In the data, similar opinions and impressions were addressed with various utterances. Additionally, the same extract could include expressions concerning engagement as well as oral interaction, therefore one segment could be allocated in oral interaction and in either academic or social engagement, but not in both kinds of engagement.

Analysis of academic and social engagement. For the first research question, two main categories according to the first research question were created: experienced impact on academic engagement and experienced impact on social engagement. Both two main categories were divided into positive and negative sections. Each chosen segment was categorized according to these main categories in an exclusive manner: each segment could belong only to one of these four categories. The total amount of the segments concerning

engagement was 1409; 1050 were in academic engagement, of which 781 were positive and 269 negative, in social engagement the total amount was 359 of which 268 were positive and 91 negative. After that, each segment was explored thoroughly, and the following subcategories were created pertaining to academic engagement: collaboration, course design, educational technology, student's activity and teacher's activity; and regarding social engagement: collaboration, student's activity and teacher's activity.

Thereafter, the subcategories were further categorised one by one in the data-driven manner focusing on the expressions of the students' experience and the following final subcategories were generated to illustrate the content of students' reflections:

Academic engagement

Collaboration

- *Learning from others:* listening to peers' presentations, or their explanation on tasks;
- *Learning together*: tackling challenging tasks together or studying grammar together;
- *Pair's language skills:* praising or criticism on pair's competences;
- *Time management*: difficulties to match timetables for pair work.

Course design

- *Assignments:* variety of activities, their topic relatedness and usability at work or not being useful at student's own work
- *Course structure:* clear timetable, deadlines and alignment of course objectives, materials and assignments;
- *Distant learning:* clear structure of the distant learning periods;
- *Face-to-face sessions:* amount of face-to-face sessions as well the variety of activities conducted in the face-to-face session;
- *Study materials:* relevant, business related material.

Educational technology

- *Effectiveness:* how efficient the applications were in terms of enhancing learning;
- *Enjoyment:* enjoyment conducting the activities with technology;
- *Usability:* defects with technology.

Student's activity

- *Feeling of progress*: reflections on own noticing improvement;
- *Own competences:* capability to evaluate own language competences and learn more accordingly;
- *Own effort:* investment regarding English studies.

Teacher's activity

- *Content expertise:* teacher's knowledge on Business English, grammar and pronunciation;
- *Guidance & support*: quantity and quality of instructions and support
- *Pedagogical expertise:* mentions on teacher's capability to teach all language skill areas, integrate technology into learning activities and provide feedback.

Social engagement

Collaboration

- *Enjoyment:* Enjoyment of collaboration, laughing together and trusting each other
- *Mutual respect*: commitment to the pair work and being responsible;
- *Peer support*: gratitude for pair's support also in other issues besides English studies.

Student's activity

- *Eagerness to invest time for interaction:* intentions and willingness to interact positively with the teacher and peers;
- *Self-esteem:* poor self-esteem which hindered learning and increased self-esteem during the course which in turn empowered the students to be socially more active
- *Sense of belonging*: sense of belonging to the group and being respected.

Teacher's activity

- *Emotional support:* teacher's acts regarding empathy and emotional support;
- *Fairness:* criticism on the teacher's method instructing only in English or giving too much space for certain students;
- *Social interaction*: the teacher's interaction style with the students.

Analysis of oral interaction. For the second research question, the same data were analysed with the similar method and two main categories were created: experienced positive and negative impact on oral interaction. The total amount of segments was 319, of which 271 were positive and 48 negatives. Thereafter, the following subcategories emerged based on the aforementioned data-driven analysis:collaboration, course design, educational technology and student's activity. In the final stage, these subcategories were divided in the following categories:

Oral interaction

Collaboration

- *Group work in face-to-face session:* benefits of discussions in bigger groups;

- *Oral language competence:* criticism on pair's insufficient oral language skill for hindering oral interaction and praising the pair's competence for advancing student's own oral language skill;
- *Peer feedback or support:* pairs encouraged one another or gave constructive feedback;
- *Video call discussions:* benefits of the weekly pair video call discussions.

Course design

- *Assignments:* multimodal, topical, authentic, business related assignments, which initiated interaction and individual practicing;
- *Course structure:* the course structure which included oral exercises throughout the course, the tolerant, error-allowing course atmosphere which encouraged the students to use the foreign language;
- *Face-to-face sessions:* oral exercises in in-class setting and interaction with the teacher and peers in the target language.

Educational technology

- *Effectiveness*: effective learning with technology e.g. making videos with own voice or practicing pronunciation with an application;
- *Enjoyment*: enjoyment with the aspects the technology provided for oral skills practicing such as competitions or enjoyment creating word-clouds or making recordings and videos;
- *Usability:* user-friendly opportunities technology provided for oral skills practicing or issues in using technology for oral interaction.

Students' activity

- *Feeling of progress*: positive reflections on improved oral skills;
- *Own competences*: shortcomings in own competences and reflection on being capable of speaking in certain encounters;
- *Own effort:* individual activities to rehearse their oral skills;
- *Self-esteem*: anxiety and low self-esteem which shows as being afraid of using the target language, or as growing self-esteem which empowers the students to speak in English.

In the last analysis phase, the emerged categories were discussed and redefined with two other researchers.

5. Findings

5.1 Features affecting academic engagement

The features affecting academic engagement are depicted in Table 2 which shows the frequencies and relative proportions of positive and negative aspects in each category.

Table 2. Features affecting academic engagement

Category	Positive mentions	Negative mentions
Collaboration	**106 (13.57%)**	**13 (4.83%)**
– Learning from others	60	-
– Learning together	46	-
– Pair's language skills	-	8
– Time management	-	5
Course design	**294 (37.64%)**	**34 (12.64%)**
– Assignments	121	14
– Course structure	43	-
– Distant learning	10	4
– Face-to-face sessions	37	6
– Study materials	83	10
Educational technology	**65 (9.32%)**	**43 (15.99%)**
– Effectiveness	27	-
– Enjoyment	38	2
– Usability	-	41
Student's activity	**278 (35.60%)**	**164 (60.97%**)
– Feeling of progress	72	11
– Own competences	57	108
– Own effort	149	45
Teacher's activity	**38 (4.87%)**	**15 (5.58%)**
– Content expertise	7	-
– Guidance & support	6	11
– Pedagogical expertise	25	4
Total	**781 (100%)**	**269 (100%)**

According to the findings, the students considered that the course design and their own activity affected the academic engagement the most. The course design was regarded to have a paramount impact on academic engagement. The students evaluated that the course was clearly structured, the timetable, the compulsory assignments, the tools to conduct them, the deadlines as well as the feedback and guiding opportunities were presented well. The students appreciated the fact that the pedagogical script with all the relevant factors was exposed and explained to the students during the first face-to-face session which allowed them to plan their learning beforehand. Furthermore, the students stated that the course material was selected to answer their working life needs, they regarded it as work-related and authentic. If the participants could not utilise the material in their work, they regarded it not engaging, for example: "I don't have to use English at work, so my practicing is minimal." The course was implemented following the blended learning method including five face-to-face sessions. All students perceived face-to-face teaching fostering their academic engagement, e.g.: "The lesson surprised me, and I didn't get bored, because the teaching was compelling." Consequently, if the number of face-to-face sessions was regarded insufficient, it had a negative impact on

students' academic engagement. The variety of assignments promoted engagement by offering novel inspiring ways to learn and conduct the tasks. The assignments were considered challenging enough.

Besides the course design the students' own activity was integral in terms of academic engagement. The students took an active role and they saw themselves self-regulated owners of their own learning; for example: "I prepared myself by learning the new material and studying the words and after that, it was easy to conduct the weekly oral tasks via WhatsApp video call with my pair." On the other hand, students were self-critical regarding their own previous language competences and the assignments were regarded as demanding, which had a negative impact on academic engagement. Lack of time was also mentioned causing decreased academic engagement. Instead, after investing time and effort students' language competences improved which in turn increased academic engagement.

Collaboration was considered to enhance academic engagement. Additionally, students noticed that peer feedback and support contributed to their learning positively; they noticed that they can learn from each other as well as through negotiations with each other. The following are examples of successful collaboration "Once again, my pair helped me with a difficult task, and we were able to have a proper conversation." "I couldn't let my pair down and not to study before our discussion." Accordingly, if the pairs were not at the same language competence level or if they could not match their timetables, the collaboration was considered to diminish academic engagement. Such comments were rare, but the following example depicts such a case: "We prepared our slides for the oral presentation but unfortunately could not find time to rehearse the presentation together, which was a shame."

Various digital tools and modes i.e. photos, text, recordings, and videos increased academic engagement. Technology was seen to foster engagement as the students noticed that the applications were beneficial in their work and other studies as well as in interaction with their peers as one student wrote: "The applications were just awesome, I used them in my other studies and work" For some, the applications diminished the academic engagement, if their usability was considered challenging, as in the following comment: "The technology steals the time from the actual language learning." In addition, the technology was considered to have value added by providing enjoyment and fun in terms of competitions and gained points and rewards.

Issues related to the teacher's role were mentioned less frequently regarding enhancing academic engagement. However, the participants appreciated the teacher's content and pedagogical expertise and guidance, as well as support and individual feedback. They also valued the teacher's knowledge of topical tools as in the following example: "I really liked the teacher's style; it was relaxed but consistent and engaging." However, if the participants felt that they were not provided enough feedback, or the instructions were unclear, their academic engagement was experienced to decrease.

5.2 Features affecting social engagement

Table 3 shows the frequencies and relative proportions of positive and negative aspects of social engagement in each category.

Table 3. Features affecting social engagement

Category	Positive mentions	Negative mentions
Collaboration	**142 (52.99%)**	**28 (30.77%)**
– Enjoyment	53	13
– Mutual respect	28	8
– Peer support	61	7
Student's activity	**96 (35.82%)**	**58 (63.74%)**
– Eagerness to invest time for interaction	16	-
– Self-esteem	48	58
– Sense of belonging	32	-
Teacher's activity	**30 (11.19%)**	**5 (5.49%)**
– Emotional support	25	1
– Fairness	-	2
– Social interaction	5	2
Total	**268 (100%)**	**91 (100%)**

Collaboration was perceived to have the most significant impact on social engagement. However, collaboration and student's own activities are intervened, and nurturing one another. For the sake of mutual respect, the students prepared themselves for the collaborative activities; they felt responsible for each other. Because of reciprocal trust, the pair discussions created a forum to discuss issues related to the studies besides the given English tasks. According to students' self-reflections, these interactions contributed strongly to social engagement and sense of belonging. In cases where collaboration was not successful, the students reported feelings of not belonging, which can be seen as a feature of failed social engagement. Due to low self-esteem or anxiety, collaborative assignments had a negative impact on social engagement, as one student described: "If I was not afraid of speaking English, pair work and collaboration would have been a great method for training oral language skills." Consequently, successful collaboration with counterparts having positive perception of their own competences added enjoyment and fun for the studies which are clearly described in the following comment: "During our weekly WhatsApp interaction we laughed a lot, I really enjoy talking with my pair"

Furthermore, students' comments manifested their eagerness to invest effort in social interaction with their peers and teacher. Several students stated that the feeling of progress and overcoming challenges had a positive impact on their social engagement, such comments were as follows: "After the oral presentation I felt like a winner, I was so nervous beforehand!" "I was scared before the course, but I have enjoyed it and I have learned a lot." Respectively,

students' responses revealed that their poor self-esteem and previous competence decreased social engagement.

The students reported that the teacher's interaction style increased their social engagement; many students valued the understanding, emotional support, and appreciation the teacher showed towards the students. In addition, various teaching methods and the fact that the teacher found time to discuss issues regarding assignments, e.g. the stage fright many students experienced before their oral presentations. A few students mentioned that they appreciated the teacher's expertise and endeavour to create positive learning experiences. The students valued the tolerant, enjoyable atmosphere where they allowed themselves to make mistakes. This perception shows in the following comment: "I remember as the teacher encouraged us by saying that you don't have to be perfect, the main thing is to interact, I want to keep that in mind." On the other hand, the teacher having too high requirements in relation to the student's own competences or providing instructions only in English decreased students' social engagement. "I didn't want to ask the teacher to explain in Finnish, because the others seemed to understand."

5.3 Features affecting oral interaction

Table 4 shows the frequencies and relative proportions of positive and negative aspects affecting oral interaction in each category.

Table 4. Features affecting oral interaction

Category	Positive mentions	Negative mentions
Collaboration	**116 (42.80 %)**	**7 (14.58%)**
– Group work in face-to-face session	23	-
– Oral language competence	4	7
– Pair feedback or support	26	-
– Video call discussions	63	-
Course design	**29 (10.70%)**	**0 (0%)**
– Assignments	13	
– Error-allowing course atmosphere;	5	
– Face-to-face sessions	11	
Educational technology	**39 (14.39%)**	**8 (16.67%)**
– Effectiveness	31	-
– Enjoyment	5	-
– Usability	3-	8
Student's activity	**87 (32.10%)**	**33 (68.75%)**
– Feeling of progress	22	-
– Own competences	14	12
– Own effort	43	8
– Self-esteem	8	13
Total	**271 (100%)**	**48 (100%)**

Collaboration was perceived to have integral effect on student's oral interaction. The students stated that the most favourable activity for rehearsing oral interaction was the weekly pair video call discussions. Many students noticed that oral skills can only be improved by speaking the target language and elaborating the new vocabulary, as one student stated: "After each pair discussion, I was proud because I felt my oral skills improved all the time." For some students, it was supportive to have the same, familiar pair for all the discussions. A part of the students mentioned that they were at first unwilling to conduct the discussions but they gradually approved them, which is clearly shown in the following comments: "For me, it was more relaxing to have the same pair throughout the course." "Initially I was reluctant to do the pair discussions, but after a while, I understood the importance of the activity." Accordingly, failed or insufficient pair work or pair's poor academic competences were experienced to have resulted in poor oral interaction. Besides the oral exercises in the distant learning session, also activities conducted in face-to-face session in pairs, small groups or with the whole class were appreciated.

Oral interaction was promoted by collaboration, but it was evident that the students had to prepare themselves beforehand. The collaborative tasks were reported to enhance oral language skills more, and the pair discussions to be more fluent when the participants were well prepared. In comparison, when students suffered from lack of time or energy to rehearse, it caused reluctance to conduct the discussions and oral interaction was less fruitful. Students' shortcomings in their own competences also affected their willingness to conduct the exercises. However, when the students experienced that their spoken language skill had improved, it encouraged them to invest more in learning and to be more active in collaborative assignments, which in turn improved their skills.

For individual practice, technology was perceived to offer suitable tools. All students stated that the multimodal assignments enriched speaking the target language. They regarded making recordings and videos as a valuable and enjoyable method to refine their pronunciation and oral utterances, as a student wrote: "After several takes, I was satisfied with my video and my pronunciation improved a lot." Digital-savvy students welcomed the opportunity of various tools provided for sparking oral interaction whereas some students experienced challenges in using technology. They claimed the course had too many or too complicated applications which shifted the focus from practicing the language skill to the technology.

As for course design, the authentic, work-related assignments initiated oral interaction. All students considered the face-to-face sessions essential; they appreciated the opportunity to rehearse together and gain immediate feedback. In general, the students praised the relaxed, tolerant atmosphere; by building an environment of trust in a targeted manner, the teacher provides the students with opportunities to practice the target language, as one student summarises: "The thing for me in this course were oral skills and pronunciation. It is awesome! Because of the relaxed atmosphere, I finally have the feeling that I have overcome the attitude that I cannot speak English!"

6. Discussion and conclusion

The first research question addressed the elements that students perceived enhancing their academic and social engagement in a blended learning language course. According to the results, the course design had the most essential impact on the students' academic and social engagement; authenticity and alignment of the course assignments, material, and the learning objectives were perceived engaging.

Further, the face-to-face sessions were regarded as important for social engagement and they promoted academic engagement as well when the teaching methods, used digital technology and assignments were versatile and covered all language competences. In addition, students' academic and social engagement was perceived to increase when the students felt themselves autonomous learners and noticed that their own commitment had an impact on their learning which is in line with previous research (Blin & Jalkanen, 2014). The students regarded their own studying and efforts contributing positively to their academic and social engagement which is in line with the principles of ecological language learning approach (van Lier, 2004).

Students' shortage of invested time and weaknesses in previous competences had a negative impact on both academic and social engagement, even though the students were self-critical regarding their own activity and language competence. Collaboration enhanced engagement as the weekly video calls formed a platform for practicing interaction in English. Additionally, video calls created a space for social interaction. Collaboration was mainly perceived positively, only few students criticised it. In addition, the supportive course atmosphere contributed to creating mutual trust and respect and students' self-esteem building, which is in line with the work of Willms, Friesen, and Milton (2009) who state that mutual respect, fairness and supporting relationship contribute to social engagement.

The second research question addressed concerns about insufficient training for oral language skills in blended learning settings. According to the results, collaboration and video calls were the most significant methods to increase oral interaction. A safe learning environment empowers students to use the target language which is in line with previous literature (Sert & Balaman, 2018; Wrigglesworth, 2019). Some students were apprehensive about the weekly video calls, but gradually they noticed how their oral skills and interaction improved and the tasks were easier to conduct, a result corresponding to that of Romaña Correa (2015) and Taillefer and Munoz-Luna (2014).

In addition, students' own activities enhanced their willingness to conduct oral assignments and their security to talk in the target language increased according to the students. However, the most significant factor contributing negatively to oral skills improvement was the lack of practicing and reported shortcomings in student's own competences. Further, according to students' self-reflections, the use of technology that allows audio and video recordings improved the learning experience and enhanced oral interaction; with

appropriate tasks and digital tools the language learning can be enhanced (Jalkanen & Taalas, 2013; Trinder, 2016).

In this study, qualitative methods were applied, since they allow investigating and describing online language learning as a process, where the learner must adapt to the time, space and environment (Stickler & Hampel, 2019). A post-course questionnaire and the learning diaries generated valuable data for investigating the aspects students experienced enhancing their engagement and oral interaction. Learning diaries reveal issues such as feelings and emotions that could remain hidden in other data collection methods, such as observations or interviews (Bailey & Oschner, 1983). Further, as the learning diaries were written throughout the course, once a week the minimum, they provided reflections on the study process and learners' activities and emotions. The results are based on students' self-reporting data; hence the study did not focus on oral language development, nor measure the oral proficiency development. This research focused on one case; therefore, the results might not be generalisable.

In terms of the practical implications of this study, it could be summarised that the course design is essential for online learning; relevant tools, as well as field-specific material and individual and collaborative multimodal assignments, should be clearly structured and scheduled. Carefully crafted learning environment sparks interaction and enhances engagement; it is evident that collaboration and pair work are paramount in online language learning, not only for learning but also for community building. Therefore, this study advocates language teachers to design online courses in a manner that collaborative and individual learning activities cover all language competences, also the challenging oral one. The aim is to spark language teachers to contemplate the possibilities technology offers for online oral competence training and encourages them to embrace the opportunity to develop more socially and academically engaging courses.

Given the limitations of this study, there are items to address in future research. For one, to focus on oral proficiency improvement in virtual learning spaces. Second, it is also worth exploring the opportunities learning analytics provides for evaluating students' engagement by measuring students' activities in the online learning platform. Finally, future studies should investigate the impact teacher's presence has on students' academic and social engagement as well as on language learning results.

Ethical statement

The students were asked for written consent to participate in the research. They were informed about the purpose of the study and were explained that their reflective learning diaries and post-course questionnaire answers have no impact on their course mark. The research participation was voluntary.

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